

The Promise of Democratic Peace:
Why Promoting Freedom Is the Only Realistic Path to Security

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Soon after arriving at the State Department earlier this year, I hung a portrait of Dean Acheson in my office. Over half a century ago, as America sought to create the world anew in the aftermath of World War II, Acheson sat in the office that I now occupy. And I hung his picture where I did for a reason.

Like Acheson and his contemporaries, we live in an extraordinary time -- one in which the terrain of international politics is shifting beneath our feet and the pace of historical change outstrips even the most vivid imagination. My predecessor's portrait is a reminder that in times of unprecedented change, the traditional diplomacy of crisis management is insufficient. Instead, we must transcend the doctrines and debates of the past and transform volatile status quos that no longer serve our interests. What is needed is a realistic statecraft for a transformed world.

President Bush outlined the vision for it in his second inaugural address: "It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." This is admittedly a bold course of action, but it is consistent with the proud tradition of American foreign policy, especially such recent presidents as Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan. Most important: Like the ambitious policies of Truman and Reagan, our statecraft will succeed not simply because it is optimistic and idealistic but also because it is premised on sound strategic logic and a proper understanding of the new realities we face.

Our statecraft today recognizes that centuries of international practice and precedent have been overturned in the past 15 years. Consider one example: For the first time since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the prospect of violent conflict between great powers is becoming ever more unthinkable. Major states are increasingly competing in peace, not preparing for war. To advance this remarkable trend, the United States is transforming our partnerships with nations such as Japan and Russia, with the European Union, and especially with China and India. Together we are building a more lasting and durable form of global stability: a balance of power that favors freedom.

This unprecedented change has supported others. Since its creation more than 350 years ago, the modern state system has always rested on the concept of sovereignty. It was assumed that states were the primary international actors and that every state was able and willing to address the threats emerging from its territory. Today, however, we have seen that these assumptions no longer hold, and as a result the greatest threats to our security are defined more by the dynamics within weak and failing states than by the borders between strong and aggressive ones.

The phenomenon of weak and failing states is not new, but the danger they now pose is unparalleled. When people, goods and information traverse the globe as fast as they do today, transnational threats such as disease or terrorism can inflict damage comparable to the standing armies of

nation-states. Absent responsible state authority, threats that would and should be contained within a country's borders can now melt into the world and wreak untold havoc. Weak and failing states serve as global pathways that facilitate the spread of pandemics, the movement of criminals and terrorists, and the proliferation of the world's most dangerous weapons.

Our experience of this new world leads us to conclude that the fundamental character of regimes matters more today than the international distribution of power. Insisting otherwise is imprudent and impractical. The goal of our statecraft is to help create a world of democratic, well-governed states that can meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system. Attempting to draw neat, clean lines between our security interests and our democratic ideals does not reflect the reality of today's world. Supporting the growth of democratic institutions in all nations is not some moralistic flight of fancy; it is the only realistic response to our present challenges.

In one region of the world, however, the problems emerging from the character of regimes are more urgent than in any other. The "freedom deficit" in the broader Middle East provides fertile ground for the growth of an ideology of hatred so vicious and virulent that it leads people to strap suicide bombs to their bodies and fly airplanes into buildings. When the citizens of this region cannot advance their interests and redress their grievances through an open political process, they retreat hopelessly into the shadows to be preyed upon by evil men with violent designs. In these societies, it is illusory to encourage economic reform by itself and hope that the freedom deficit will work itself out over time.

Though the broader Middle East has no history of democracy, this is not an excuse for doing nothing. If every action required a precedent, there would be no firsts. We are confident that democracy will succeed in this region not simply because we have faith in our principles but because the basic human longing for liberty and democratic rights has transformed our world. Dogmatic cynics and cultural determinists were once certain that "Asian values," or Latin culture, or Slavic despotism, or African tribalism would each render democracy impossible. But they were wrong, and our statecraft must now be guided by the undeniable truth that democracy is the only assurance of lasting peace and security between states, because it is the only guarantee of freedom and justice within states.

Implicit within the goals of our statecraft are the limits of our power and the reasons for our humility. Unlike tyranny, democracy by its very nature is never imposed. Citizens of conviction must choose it -- and not just in one election. The work of democracy is a daily process to build the institutions of democracy: the rule of law, an independent judiciary, free media and property rights, among others. The United States cannot manufacture these outcomes, but we can and must create opportunities for individuals to assume ownership of their own lives and nations. Our power gains its greatest legitimacy when we support the natural right of all people, even those who disagree with us, to govern themselves in liberty.

The statecraft that America is called to practice in today's world is ambitious, even revolutionary, but it is not imprudent. A conservative temperament will rightly be skeptical of any policy that embraces change and rejects the status quo, but that is not an argument against the merits of such a policy. As Truman once said, "The world is not static, and the

status quo is not sacred." In times of extraordinary change such as ours, when the costs of inaction outweigh the risks of action, doing nothing is not an option. If the school of thought called "realism" is to be truly realistic, it must recognize that stability without democracy will prove to be false stability, and that fear of change is not a positive prescription for policy.

After all, who truly believes, after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that the status quo in the Middle East was stable, beneficial and worth defending? How could it have been prudent to preserve the state of affairs in a region that was incubating and exporting terrorism; where the proliferation of deadly weapons was getting worse, not better; where authoritarian regimes were projecting their failures onto innocent nations and peoples; where Lebanon suffered under the boot heel of Syrian occupation; where a corrupt Palestinian Authority cared more for its own preservation than for its people's aspirations; and where a tyrant such as Saddam Hussein was free to slaughter his citizens, destabilize his neighbors and undermine the hope of peace between Israelis and Palestinians? It is sheer fantasy to assume that the Middle East was just peachy before America disrupted its alleged stability.

Had we believed this, and had we done nothing, consider all that we would have missed in just the past year: A Lebanon that is free of foreign occupation and advancing democratic reform. A Palestinian Authority run by an elected leader who openly calls for peace with Israel. An Egypt that has amended its constitution to hold multiparty elections. A Kuwait where women are now full citizens. And, of course, an Iraq that in the face of a horrific insurgency has held historic elections, drafted and ratified a new national charter, and will go to the polls again in coming days to elect a new constitutional government.

At this time last year, such unprecedented progress seemed impossible. One day it will all seem to have been inevitable. This is the nature of extraordinary times, which Acheson understood well and described perfectly in his memoirs. "The significance of events," he wrote, "was shrouded in ambiguity. We groped after interpretations of them, sometimes reversed lines of action based on earlier views, and hesitated long before grasping what now seems obvious." When Acheson left office in 1953, he could not know the fate of the policies he helped to create. He certainly could never have predicted that nearly four decades later, war between Europe's major powers would be unthinkable, or that America and the world would be harvesting the fruits of his good decisions and managing the collapse of communism. But because leaders such as Acheson steered American statecraft with our principles when precedents for action were lacking, because they dealt with their world as it was but never believed they were powerless to change it for the better, the promise of democratic peace is now a reality in all of Europe and in much of Asia.

When I walk past Acheson's portrait upon departing my office for the last time, no one will be able to know the full scope of what our statecraft has achieved. But I have an abiding confidence that we will have laid a firm foundation of principle -- a foundation on which future generations will realize our nation's vision of a fully free, democratic and peaceful world.